DUNE:
RED PLAGUE
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An all-new Tale of the Great Schools of Dune — written to accompany Navigators of Dune by the same authors (Tor, September 2016).

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Even in his dreams, he could still hear the long-ago cheering and feel the energy and heartfelt dedication of the crowd. It roared around him, making his sleep restless. Young Manford Torondo could see the beatific face of Rayna Butler, his inspiration, his beloved mentor—whose vision had brought healing and faith to the human race after the bloody generations-long Jihad.

He could see Rayna's lips moving, but Manford could no longer remember the words she was speaking, because at that moment he had seen the bomb, had known it would explode. He rushed the stage, trying to save her, trying to throw himself upon the destructive device.

But it was too late.

The explosion was like a sun ripping open, right next to Rayna. He saw the shock wave, felt the flames, the energy that ripped bodies apart, destroyed the stage, sent fire and smoke and debris in all directions. Manford didn't feel his own pain, even though he had been close to the blast, much too close. He saw the mangled remnants of Rayna Butler, her clothing splashed red, her skin torn and lacerated. Frantic, he tried to run to her, tried to reach her, but for some reason he could barely move. He had nothing left but to crawl, and so he crawled.

It was only later that he realized he no longer had his legs. The blast had torn away the lower half of his body, leaving only gruesome shreds below his hips. But his own wounds were utterly unimportant. He had to get to Rayna, had to save her, to hold her

somehow. Though his ruined body was only moments from catatonic shock, he used his bloody elbows to haul himself forward. He got to Rayna, touched her, looked into her eyes, and he imagined he saw the light still there, but fading. Finally, he summoned the energy to scream. . . .

He screamed now as firm hands shook him by the shoulders, and he woke in his narrow bed, his truncated body covered by a rough woolen blanket.

"Manford, you had that nightmare again," said Anari Idaho, his tall and muscular Swordmaster, his guardian, his most devoted companion. She loomed over him, her face filled with concern. "Rayna still haunts you, doesn't she?"

Manford swallowed in a dry throat and let her help him into a sitting position. "Rayna still blesses me with her memories. Even the most horrific vision of her is still *her*. Rayna was better than us all." He sighed. "Yet the burden falls to me to do the best I can to carry on her work. I must save the soul of humanity from its own temptation."

#

"The people of Walgis are dying, Directeur, and they are crying out for help."

The black-garbed Mentat, Draigo Roget, issued his report in the offices of Josef Venport on the industrialist's capital world of Kolhar. The plight of that primitive planet sparked little sympathy in Venport's mind. He stroked his thick, cinnamon-colored mustache and frowned, sitting straight at his desk in the headquarters tower. He was the Directeur of Venport Holdings, a huge commercial empire that was now under siege and outlawed by the new Emperor Roderick Corrino. Venport was more concerned with his own dire situation than a few sick zealots.

"Let them cry," he said. "Let them plead." He allowed himself a small smile. "Let them reconsider their decision to follow the Butlerian nonsense and turn their backs on reason and civilization. One should expect plagues and diseases on a world that shuns even

the most basic tenets of medicine."

Sighing, Venport sat back at his desk. His company was in turmoil, his commercial space fleet made technically illegal by Imperial decree, yet still functioning because the Imperium needed their trade, needed their precious materials. They needed Josef Venport.

"The people of Walgis made their own decision when they chose to side with the barbarian half-Manford," he said. "I made my terms clear to them. Why should I help them now?"

The lean Mentat stood motionless, like a statue. His expression was blank. "Because one might wish to consider the bigger picture, Directeur. This is our chance to cause serious psychological damage to the Butlerian movement."

Draigo's gaze was intense. His thoughts were well-ordered, the way he'd been trained in the now-overthrown Mentat School on Lampadas. He stood by, waiting for his words to sink in. Venport knew that Draigo gave good and well-considered advice, even though he was reluctant to hear it.

The Directeur had spent many years building his multi-planet empire, developing mutant Navigators who could guide foldspace ships safely across the Imperium. Venport had drawn together the best technology that had survived Serena Butler's Jihad and now tried to rebuild weary humanity to a new golden age, while Manford's fanatics wanted a new dark age. Yes, the Jihad had overthrown the horrific thinking machines and freed all of humanity . . . but freeing humanity did not mean reducing them to stone-age primitives. All high technology should not be discarded.

But the Butlerians believed exactly that. Led by Manford Torondo, the zealots wanted to reduce humanity to a primitive agrarian culture scattered across the galaxy. Josef Venport found himself entirely at odds with the legless freak.

Many planets had taken the Butlerian pledge, refusing the advances and benefits offered by Venport Holdings, and so he had imposed a retaliatory blockade on such worlds, refusing to deliver cargo or services until they renounced Manford's foolishness. He had hoped

to make them see reason.

Walgis was one such world, and now they were in desperate straits. The red plague, a highly contagious and swiftly spreading disease, had appeared among the population. Thousands were already dead, tens of thousands infected and suffering, and the disease showed no sign of slowing.

“It seems to me that the plague is reducing the numbers of Butlerian fanatics,” Venport said. “Tell me, Mentat, why is that not a good thing?”

“They’re asking for help, Directeur, and providing such assistance would be a simple thing for us. Even Emperor Roderick could not criticize such an obvious humanitarian gesture. Perhaps it would soften his heart toward you.”

“I don’t care about the Emperor,” Venport said.

“Yes, you do, sir, because your current status as an outlaw adversely affects your business dealings.”

Venport frowned, but he could not deny the logic.

Draigo turned to the doorway, raised his hand in a signal, and a thin, small-statured man entered, wearing a loose white robe. The newcomer had long, steel-gray hair and a pointed beard at the tip of his chin. “Directeur, I wish to introduce you to Dr. Rohan Zim, who has come to us from the Suk Medical School on Parmentier. He urged me to help him make his case to you.”

Intrigued by the visitor, Venport put his elbows on the desk, steepled his fingers, and looked at the Suk-trained doctor. “Why can’t he make his own case?”

Zim hurried forward. “I will, Directeur Venport.” From a pocket, he produced a data crystal, which he inserted into the player embedded in Venport’s desk. Like mist rising on a cool morning, images appeared in the air, holographic recordings that showed miserable people lying in endless lines of rickety beds. The victims writhed and moaned, their faces covered in perspiration, their skin

tones grayish, their faces blotched with scarlet eruptions. “As you can see, Directeur, the red plague is terrible. It will continue to spread, but we can do something about it.”

“You mean impose a quarantine?” Venport asked. “We don’t want any infected people to get out and spread the disease to other populated worlds, especially those that are highly civilized.”

Draigo said, “Manford Torondo’s Butlerian ships are already in orbit, enforcing their own blockade. The people of Walgis have little enough capability for space travel as it is. They are being kept confined without any interference from us.”

The Suk doctor interjected, “And even if it were to spread, the disease is easily treatable with modern medicine. That is why I am here, Directeur. We have readily available vaccines. On Parmentier, the Suk Medical School has been manufacturing the necessary drugs to cure the red plague—provided we can deliver them to the sick. And for that we need the assistance of the VenHold Spacing Fleet.”

Venport frowned. “Again, I must ask, why does it serve my purposes to save barbarians who want to destroy me?”

Rohan Zim gave the Directeur a dark look. “At the Suk Medical School, we all swear an oath to tend the sick and dying, to treat those who need our medical expertise.”

Venport made a dismissive gesture. “You speak to me of altruism? Can you not make a better argument?”

The Mentat took a step closer, meeting Venport’s gaze even as the holo-images of the miserable plague victims continued to play in the air above the desk. “It would be a good business decision, I believe. The Suk Medical School is already offering the vaccines and treatments, so long as we provide transport. It would cost you little, yet we could make it apparent that you—Directeur Josef Venport—are the savior of this world. It will prove to all, not just to Emperor Roderick, that you are a good man who is willing to take the high road. After you save Walgis, you might even win over the people there, make them reconsider their decision to side with the Butlerians.” The Mentat shrugged. “It’s possible.”

Venport mulled over the idea, saw the implications. He smiled. “Ah, and it would be a victory over the half-Manford. It would show me to be superior.” Then he gave a brisk nod. “Very well, Dr. Zim. Gather your vaccines and treatments, and I’ll provide one of our smaller ships to transport you to Walgis. Save those people in my name, whether or not they deserve it.”

Anari Idaho lit a lamp, which shed a warm, golden glow throughout Manford’s private quarters in his small cottage on Lampadas. “The people love you just as you loved Rayna,” she said to him. “You are the voice of the Butlerians. You are the soul of humanity, the only thing that keeps us from slipping back into the clutches of the evil thinking machines.”

“And the demon Venport with his cursed technology,” Manford said.

Anari gave a brusque nod. “I consider them one and the same, and that is why this news is disturbing. We have more reports from Walgis, where the red plague continues to spread.”

Manford lowered his head solemnly. “Do we know how many are dead?”

“Tens of thousands. Yet our blockade and quarantine holds. They will not escape and infect others, but no one has ventured to the surface to tend them directly.”

He gave another nod. “As I ordered.”

“Our warships enforce the cordon, and it is holding. But the people . . .” She drew a breath and shook her head. “They are desperate, Manford. They’re begging you for help.”

“I am very moved by this tragedy,” he said. “The people of Walgis are my most devoted followers. They were among the first to take the Butlerian pledge, shunning all technology and cutting themselves off from temptations. They have remained strong. They would suffer anything for me—you know that. I wish I could repay

their loyalty somehow."

Anari lifted him up and helped him dress, even though his entire body ended below his hips. When he needed to travel, the Swordmaster would place him in a special harness on her back so she could carry him anywhere.

The answer was obvious, and he didn't hesitate. "I've decided what to do," he said. "Anari, you will accompany me to Walgis. I intend to join the quarantine fleet in orbit there and pray for the people who are suffering. I can watch over them and show them my love."

Anari nodded. "I like that idea. You can speak with them, give them comfort. You can bless them, even from orbit."

The VenHold spacefolder, guided by one of the rare and mysterious Navigators, was the swiftest and most reliable means of transportation in the known universe. Even so, Dr. Rohan Zim found the delay agonizing as he waited for the ship to arrive at Walgis.

Ever since hearing about the deadly plague, he had tirelessly rallied the doctors at the new medical facilities on Parmentier. He wanted to save those people, even if they were Butlerians. A mob of the anti-technology fanatics had burned down the longstanding Suk Medical School on Salusa Secundus, and they had demonstrated against medical technology, even against basic surgical advances. The zealots considered sophisticated new prosthetics and artificial organs to be abhorrent. They railed against scientific progress that would have increased food production and saved countless lives.

Dr. Rohan Zim found very little to like about the backward Butlerians. But they were still *people*, and he had taken a solemn vow when he became a Suk doctor.

Upon receiving approval from Directeur Venport, Zim rushed back to Parmentier, where his people had been working nonstop to manufacture the vital vaccines and treatments for those afflicted. Despite its virulence, the red plague was an old disease, well

recognized and mostly eradicated across human-settled planets. The cure existed; it just needed to be delivered to the sick.

The people on Walgis had to agree to the treatment, even if it had a strong basis in technology. Zim had no doubts, though: There was nothing like watching one's family moan and die in feverish misery to make a person reassess esoteric beliefs.

Dr. Zim and his Suk colleagues had created and packaged one hundred thousand doses of the cure. They would need help distributing and administering the vaccines, but his volunteers would teach others, who would in turn teach even more, and perhaps the red plague would be caught and stopped. Once those hundred thousand doses were delivered, the recovered victims would provide the antibodies to cure the rest. Zim wished his team had been able to begin a week sooner.

Now he joined the other doctors on the observation deck during the final foldspace jump to Walgis. When the Holtzman engines activated, there was only a brief distortion as space folded around the small vessel. The Navigator, in his murky tank of swirling gas, chose a path and guided the ship, and then emerged as ripples in the fabric of the universe smoothed out again, returning them to normal space just outside of Walgis.

One of the doctors pointed out the observation window at a bright dot that grew progressively larger as the spacefolder accelerated toward its destination. As the planet became a discernible disc, they could see bright lights, flickering shapes of large ships in orbit—battleships.

"Those will be the Butlerian vessels," Zim said. "A quarantine cordon to keep the infected from escaping. In that matter, at least, we can thank Manford Torondo."

He looked to the wall as his fellow doctors gathered at the observation window. He raised his voice to the VenHold crew, who were listening on the wall pickup. "Open a communication channel, please. I wish to address the planet Walgis as well as the quarantine ships. They will want to hear our good news."

Within moments the comm officer acknowledged that the channel was open, and Dr. Zim cleared his throat, straightened his white robes, brushed his beard flat, and looked at the image pickup on the wall.

“People of Walgis, we are doctors from the Suk Medical laboratories on Parmentier. We respect all life, without regard to political or religious beliefs. We know of your plight and are pleased to offer our assistance and expertise.” He drew a breath and acknowledged their benefactor. “With the benevolence of Directeur Josef Venport, we have come here to help. Your suffering is nearly ended, and we will care for you and save as many as we possibly can.” He smiled. “We have brought vaccines!”

Aboard the quarantine fleet, Manford had been praying. He knew that all the people on the planet below were in his care—not just their fever-wracked and weak physical bodies, but their souls as well, for him to guide and advise. He helped them not to be weak when temptations were strong.

For three days now, ever since arriving to join the battleship cordon with the diligent Anari Idaho, Manford had addressed the entire planet. He spoke to the grieving and suffering people. He blessed them, knowing they took comfort in his compassionate words. With a gesture and a prayer, Manford Torondo, heir to the dreams of Rayna Butler, could bring hope and clarity, not just to those below who were doomed by the red plague, but to all of his followers, who would similarly draw strength from his heroic presence here at Walgis. Every Butlerian must know how Manford’s heart ached when even one of his followers was harmed.

On the bridge of one of the Butlerian quarantine ships, Manford rode comfortably in the harness on Anari’s shoulders. She had placed him there so that he could ride tall, his legless torso fitting neatly into the leather embrace. He was the commander, the great leader and visionary. He’d been staring down at the deceptively peaceful appearance of the planet below. Walgis, a staunchly loyal Butlerian world, had once been ravaged by thinking machines during the Jihad. The people had been crushed and tormented, but

through adversity came strength. Manford was proud of them.

He'd been thinking about the explosion at Rayna's last rally, how he had lost the lower half of his body and yet emerged stronger than ever before with a sharper focus, and a greater determination —"Half a man, twice the leader." Those who survived down there would be even more fiercely loyal than the population had been before. . . .

And then the VenHold ship arrived over Walgis, a small vessel broadcasting a message of supposed hope and deceptive miracles. Manford felt his muscles tense as he reached down to hold onto Anari's shoulders, drawing strength from her. She felt as solid as an old tree.

"We have brought vaccines," said the Suk doctor aboard the approaching vessel.

His jaw ached as he gritted his teeth. Manford called all of his quarantine ships to high alert. Rather than turning their weapons toward the planet below to prevent escapees, now they focused their firepower outward, their crews ready to face this oncoming threat.

Manford broadcast to the population below, not bothering to respond directly to the VenHold ship. "You are strong enough without medicine. Our beloved Rayna Butler endured the most horrific plagues spread by the thinking machines; diseases far worse than the red plague. Her heart and soul were strong, and she recovered. Rayna recovered because *God* wanted her to recover, knowing she had greater work to do. God will make you recover as well."

He cut off the communication and looked at Anari, who gazed up at him with complete acceptance and reverence. All around the bridge of his flagship, he saw similar expressions, giving him assurance that every vessel in the quarantine cordon would react the same.

"We must protect them from the sinister influence," Manford said. "We have to safeguard my people from the insidious promises of the demon Venport, and from their own weaknesses."

Steeling himself, he sent another transmission. “To all the afflicted people of Walgis, rejoice! You are saved.”

Then he gave the order for all of his battleships around the planet to target the incoming medical ship. He felt no hesitation, merely relief when he issued his instruction. “Open fire.”

And his crews obeyed.

Out on the Kolhar landing field, Josef Venport gazed at his numerous ships, a fleet of spacefolder transports and large cargo shuttles that would travel to orbit to dock with even larger carriers. These well-armed ships were an enhancement to his own defenses, in case Emperor Roderick ever got up the nerve to attack here.

Fueling tankers filled the reservoirs of the large ships. With a whistling roar, one of the cargo shuttles heaved itself from the launching platform and thundered up into the sky. On the field, heavy machinery moved about, giving him a satisfied feeling. His VenHold fleet kept delivering much-needed—and now higher-priced—cargo to any planets in the Imperium that could afford the payments. It almost seemed like business as usual.

Except the entire Imperium had turned on its head.

“It defies reason! This is more insane than Manford has been before.” As he walked along, he clenched his fists and the black-garbed Draigo kept pace with gliding steps. “He destroyed our vessel, wiped out its cargo of vaccines, and left his own followers to rot from the pandemic. *And they cheered him as he did it!*”

Draigo gave a small nod. “In my Mentat projections, sir, I recognized a very small possibility that the Butlerians might react this way. I apologize for not giving it sufficient credence.”

“No one could have predicted such a heinous response, Draigo,” Venport said. “Even now that you’ve delivered your report, I still can’t believe it. Manford has doomed his people to die from a disease that is easily cured just because he doesn’t want the help to

come from me. He's a madman and a mass murderer."

Venport felt disgusted as well as angry. He didn't really care about the dying barbarians on Walgis. As far as he was concerned, they could all suffer horribly from the red plague. And truth be told, he lost only one small ship, easily replaced, and a few Suk doctors who weren't even his employees. As a business loss, Venport could easily overcome it. But it was so damned outrageous! He was having a very hard time believing the half-Manford's immoral act.

Draigo Roget shook his head. "It defies logic. If I am to make more accurate projections about our opponent, I shall have to learn to think more irrationally."

Venport stopped to watch a delivery vehicle bearing a sealed container of spice gas, pumping it into one of the ships to fill a Navigator's sealed tank. He considered all the battles he had fought, his struggles to save humanity and rebuild civilization, to overcome the scars the thinking machines had left . . . as well as his struggles against the inept and foolhardy Emperor Salvador. For the good of all humankind, Venport had replaced Salvador with his brother Roderick, a man he believed to be more rational—although Roderick was now more interested in revenge than in strengthening his Imperium.

"Sometimes I despair for humanity, and wonder why I continue this desperate and ruthless fight," Venport said with a dismayed sigh. "Even after the defeat of the thinking machines and my constant struggles to help our race recover, the Butlerian fanatics remain. I fear they are our worst enemy. They will destroy our future as surely as any army of thinking machines ever could. The barbarians must be destroyed. No matter what weapons we must use or what sacrifices we must make, we have to crush Manford Torondo and his followers at all costs."

"I agree, Directeur," said Draigo.

Venport felt confident, though not arrogant. The Butlerian movement was composed of primitives, rabid barbarians, while VenHold had the most sophisticated technology in the Imperium. "They are no match for us," he said.

Beside him, Draigo did not respond, but his brow furrowed as he reviewed the facts. Venport strode ahead, assessing his ships and other resources.

When the Mentat responded, he spoke so quietly that Venport almost didn't hear his words. "And yet, I fear they will win."